



## <c2>Prologue</c2>

The driver's knuckles turned white as he gripped the steering wheel of the Humvee and planted his foot hard on the pedal. The immense engine roared and the armoured vehicle shot on to the bomb-blasted road.

As the Humvee tore across the potholed concrete that stretched into the distance like the cracked skin of a dead snake, the two passengers in the back could only stare at the hellish images of a war-torn Iraq whipping past their windows. Barren patches of garbage-strewn desert, burnt-out carcasses of abandoned vehicles, crumbling buildings pockmarked with bullet holes, and the haunted faces of Iraqi children scavenging among the rubble.

The younger of the two passengers, a fresh-faced female diplomatic aide with styled blonde hair, wiped away a tear with an unsteady hand. The other, a tall handsome Hispanic man with strong cheekbones and deep brown eyes as sharp as an eagle's, was more composed. Yet his tense grip on the seat's armrest betrayed his deeper unease.

The bodyguard alone remained impassive, strapped into the front passenger seat, his MP5 sub-machine gun across his lap. He'd survived this run many times. Not that it made the drive any easier. Less than 12 kilometres long, this sweeping bend of road was the sole artery that connected Baghdad International Airport to the Green Zone – the fortress-like military and governmental safe haven in the heart of Baghdad. This made Route Irish the most dangerous stretch of highway in the world – a ready-made shooting gallery for terrorists and insurgents. Any attempt to travel the route was little more than a suicidal dash.

*And today the stakes are even higher*, thought the bodyguard, glancing over his shoulder at the newly appointed US Ambassador to Iraq. Usually the Americans arranged for a helicopter to transport senior officials between the airport and the zone, but high winds and the threat of a sandstorm had grounded all aircraft.

The bodyguard's eyes scanned the terrain beyond the bulletproof glass. In front and behind were three more Humvees thundering down the highway, forming a formidable military escort. These vehicles were armed to the teeth with mounted M2 heavy machine guns and MK19 grenade launchers. As the convoy raced along, the lead Humvee cleared the road ahead, barging civilian vehicles to one side if they didn't move out of the way quickly enough.

An underpass came into view and the bodyguard tensed. This was a prime spot for an attack. The bridge would have been swept for improvised explosive devices the night before. But that didn't mean *all* the IEDs had been discovered. His hand instinctively felt for the key fob in his pocket. He carried it with him everywhere. It contained a photo of his smiling eight-year-old son. Squeezing the talisman, the bodyguard vowed – as he always did – that he *would* survive the journey, if only for the sake of his son.

As they passed beneath the graffiti-scrawled bridge, he kept his eyes peeled for 'dickers' – lookouts who phoned ahead to rebel fighters lying in wait. The call might trigger a vehicle packed with explosives, a roadside IED, a suicide bomber, a drive-by shooting or even a barrage of mortars and rocket-propelled grenades. The bodyguard had witnessed all these assaults at one time or another, and they always ended in tragedy.

Emerging on the other side of the underpass, he heard the driver breathe a sigh of

relief as he gunned the Humvee faster towards the Green Zone. The bodyguard resumed his surveillance sweep – scouring for threats among the surrounding traffic, the tree stumps on the central reservation, the housing estates to the south, and the approaching overpass and ramps of the next concrete-jungle intersection.

‘This isn’t good,’ muttered the driver as their convoy began to slow to a snail’s pace. In the distance the traffic had ground to a halt.

The HF radio burst into life. ‘*Tango One to Tango Three. Collision up ahead.*’

From the rear vehicle, the team leader responded. ‘Tango One, this is Tango Three. Push on through. Use the central reservation.’

The lead vehicle approached the hold-up. As it mounted the kerb, the bodyguard’s attention was drawn to a dead dog lying at the side of the road. The carcass, left to rot in the sun, appeared unnaturally bloated.

Then, as their own vehicle drew closer, the bodyguard spotted a man on the overpass, talking into his mobile phone. His instincts kicked into overdrive and he reached across to yank the steering wheel hard right. Startled, the driver gave him a furious look as their Humvee veered off the highway.

A split second later the booby-trapped dog exploded, engulfing the lead vehicle in a ball of flame.

The blast rocked their own Humvee with its intensity. The aide screamed in terror as a wave of hellfire rolled towards them. Keeping his composure, the bodyguard scanned the horizon and, out of the corner of his eye, spotted the telltale flare of a rocket-propelled grenade being fired from a nearby block of flats.

‘GO, GO, GO!’ he bawled at the driver.

The soldier floored the accelerator and the engine screamed in protest. They shot forwards, but it was too late. The RPG struck their rear end and detonated. Despite the Humvee weighing over two and a half tons, the vehicle flipped into the air like a child's toy. Inside, the occupants were thrown around like rag dolls. The Humvee landed with a tremendous crash upon the driver's side. Instantly the cabin filled with smoke and the acrid stench of burning paint and diesel.

The bodyguard's ears rang as he fought to orientate himself. Wedging himself in his seat, he looked round to check on his Principal. The Humvee had been up-armoured to withstand such attacks, but a direct hit meant the damage was still devastating. The bodyguard also knew a second strike would be the end for them.

'Sir? SIR!' he shouted, waving away the smoke to find the ambassador. 'Are you OK?'

Dazed but conscious, the ambassador nodded his head.

'We have to get out *now*!' the bodyguard explained, reaching back and undoing the man's seat belt. He tapped the driver on the shoulder. 'You take the second Principal.'

But the driver didn't respond. He was dead, having smashed his head against the windscreen on impact.

Cursing, the bodyguard tried to push open the front passenger door. But, even with his full body weight against it, he couldn't budge it. The force of the explosion had twisted the Humvee's heavily armoured construction and the door was jammed shut. They were trapped like sardines in a can.

Grabbing his gun from the footwell, he now prayed the bulletproof glass was one-way, as he'd requested.

‘Cover your face!’ the bodyguard ordered the ambassador.

Aiming the MP5 at the far corner of the windscreen, the bodyguard fired off several rounds and the glass exploded outwards. He kicked the screen free, the smoke cleared and he crawled through the opening.

Outside a full-on firefight was occurring. Ear-splitting blasts of grenades and the thunder of heavy machine guns mixed with the concussive explosion of mortars. The air was thick with black smoke and the *whizz* of speeding bullets.

Turning back, he helped the ambassador clamber from the Humvee and pulled him into the cover of its chassis.

‘Hayley!’ the ambassador implored, indicating his aide hanging limp in the back seat.

But the bodyguard had already clocked her condition. The young woman had taken the full force of the mortar. He shook his head regretfully. ‘She’s dead.’

Sheltering the ambassador from gunfire, he signalled for the back-up team. The rear Humvee driver spotted them and steered in their direction as a white sedan came tearing down the road from behind. Before any evasive action was possible, the rogue car was alongside. A second later it exploded. The Humvee was annihilated in the blast, taking with it the entire crew and any hope of rescue.

The bodyguard needed no further proof this was a carefully coordinated attack. A simultaneous assault of IEDs, RPGs and suicide bombers meant the rebels had known the ambassador’s itinerary and were going all-out to assassinate him.

With the operation so jeopardized, the bodyguard decided he had to break protocol if he was to save his Principal’s life. Besides, it was only a matter of time before

another rocket hit their disabled Humvee.

‘We’re sitting ducks out here,’ said the bodyguard. ‘Are you able to run?’

‘Won the four-hundred metre dash at UCLA,’ replied the ambassador.

‘Then stay close and do exactly as I say. We’re heading for the underpass.’

He let loose a spray of covering fire. Then, using his body as a shield, he grabbed the ambassador and led him across open ground. As they dashed for safety, the supersonic crack of rebel bullets flew past their heads.

Behind them, an RPG hit their Humvee. The two of them were thrown to the ground by the explosion. Adrenalin pumped to the max, the bodyguard dragged the ambassador back to his feet.

Diving for cover behind a battered BMW, he stopped to assess their situation. The last surviving Humvee was battling to suppress enemy fire. The few Iraqi civilians who hadn’t reached the underpass cowered behind their cars. The bodyguard knew most would be innocent civilians, but he kept his gun primed: it would take only one rebel to kill the ambassador.

Peering round the bonnet, he sighted a black SUV with tinted windows roll down a nearby on-ramp. Its passenger window was open, a gun barrel poking out in their direction.

Suddenly the BMW erupted with the pepper of bullets and its windscreen shattered. The bodyguard dropped on top of the ambassador, shielding him from the deadly shots. The car took the worst of the assault as round after round rattled its bodywork. Then the barrage ceased as the surviving Humvee’s machine-gunner turned his sights on the rebels’ SUV, forcing them to change target.

‘We can’t get pinned down here,’ the bodyguard grunted, rolling off the ambassador.

Staying low, they weaved between the cars towards the underpass, a hail of bullets following close on their tail. As soon as they were beneath its shelter, the bodyguard hunted for a car that wasn’t blocked in by the now obviously prearranged accident. He spotted a silver Mercedes-Benz near the front of the pile-up.

The blast of a machine gun and terrified screams echoed through the underpass.

‘They’re following us!’ exclaimed the ambassador, glancing over his shoulder in alarm.

Pushing his Principal ahead, the bodyguard returned fire, ensuring he was between the ambassador and the gunmen at all times.

Zigzagging through the cars, they were almost at the Mercedes when the ambassador came to a dead stop.

‘Keep going!’ urged the bodyguard.

Then he too saw the man standing before them.

Dressed in jeans and T-shirt, his face hidden behind a red-and-white headscarf, the rebel held an AK-47 assault rifle aimed directly at the ambassador.

He fired.

Instinctively the bodyguard leapt in front of the ambassador, knocking him aside. The ambassador could only watch as his saviour was thrown back by the blaze of bullets, then crashed to the floor – lifeless.

The bodyguard had made the ultimate sacrifice to save him.

But it would all be in vain. The rebel strode over and planted the smoking barrel



of the AK-47 in the ambassador's face.

'Now *you* die, infidel!' snarled the rebel.

'You can murder me, but you won't murder hope,' said the ambassador, staring defiantly back at the insurgent.

By all rights, the bodyguard should have been killed instantly, but his bulletproof vest had protected him from the worst of the assault. Barely conscious, only his deeply ingrained training allowed him to react. He'd lost hold of his MP5, but pulling a SIG Sauer P228 from his hip, he shot the rebel at point-blank range.

Before the man had even hit the ground, the bodyguard was struggling to his feet. His limbs felt as heavy as lead and there was a worrying coppery taste in his mouth.

'You're alive!' exclaimed the ambassador, rushing to his aid.

Staggering over to the Mercedes, the bodyguard yanked the door open. The driver had already fled for his life, leaving the keys in the ignition.

'Get in and stay low,' he instructed the ambassador, gasping for breath.

Fumbling with the keys, he begged the car to start first time as the back window imploded from a strafing of bullets. The engine kicked into life, the bodyguard slammed his foot on the accelerator and they shot out on to Route Irish. A hail of gunfire rained down on them from the bridge above. Weaving to avoid it, the bodyguard powered down the road, swerving round potholes, until the thunder of battle receded into the distance.

'You're seriously hurt!' said the ambassador, noticing the driver's seat was dripping with blood.

The bodyguard barely acknowledged him as he focused the last of his strength on carrying out his duty. Approaching the blast-walled safety of the Green Zone's first

checkpoint, he slowed the Mercedes. The sentries would have no idea he was carrying the ambassador and would more than likely shoot first. Stopping short of the barrier, he got out of the car with the ambassador and walked the final stretch.

Still scanning for threats, the bodyguard stumbled, blood now soaking through his combats.

‘We must get you to a hospital,’ the ambassador insisted, taking his arm.

The bodyguard looked absently down at himself. Only now with the adrenalin fading did the pain register. ‘Too late for that,’ he grimaced.

United Nations soldiers rushed out, surrounding them in a protective cordon.

‘You’re safe now, sir,’ said the bodyguard as he collapsed at the ambassador’s feet, a small bloodstained key fob clutched in his hand.